RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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Housing Discrimination Against Victims of Domestic Violence

INTRODUCTION

Battered women say that they have problems finding safe, affordable housing.

One reason may be discrimination, based on commonly-held stereotypes concerning battered women. Landlords might hold the same stereotypes, see battered women as undesirable tenants, and not give them a fair chance to rent a unit.

This study, under the External Research Program (ERP) funded by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), attempted to find out if landlords discriminate against battered women.

METHODOLOGY

Survey 1

A rigorous experimental design examined whether landlords discriminate against victims of domestic violence. Three scenarios were used—basic, child and answering machine (see below). Within each scenario there were three conditions—shelter, friends and control (see below). The researchers telephoned landlords, giving one of the conditions, and asked if an advertised rental unit was available.

Basic scenario

Shelter condition	Friends condition	Control condition
"Yes, I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____ and actually, **I'm staying at a shelter for battered women right now**, but I'd like to move at the end of the month. Is the apartment still available?"	"Yes, I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____ and actually, **I'm staying with friends right now**, but I'd like to move at the end of the month. Is the apartment still available?"	"Yes, I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____ and actually I'd like to move at the end of the month. Is the apartment still available?"

Child scenario

In the child scenario, "with my little girl" was added in each of the three conditions after the statement "I'd like to move."

Shelter condition	Friends condition	Control condition
"Yes, I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____ and actually, I'm staying at a shelter for battered women right now, but I'd like to move **with my little girl** at the end of the month. Is the apartment still available?"	"Yes, I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____ and actually, I'm staying with friends right now, but I'd like to move **with my little girl** at the end of the month. Is the apartment still available?"	"Yes, I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____and actually I'd like to move **with my little girl** at the end of the month. Is the apartment still available?"

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Answering machine scenario

In the answering machine scenario, the caller left a message on the landlord's answering machine in each of the three conditions that was similar to the basic scenario, but said the caller was employed.

Shelter condition	Friends condition	Control condition
"Hi, my name is **Jane** and I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____. **I'm staying at a shelter for battered women right now**, but you can leave a message for me at my workplace at anytime. The number is _____. Please call and let me know if the apartment is still available. Thanks."	"Hi, my name is **Patricia** and I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____. **I'm staying with friends right now**, but you can leave a message for me at my workplace at anytime. The number is _____. Please call and let me know if the apartment is still available. Thanks."	"Hi, my name is **Rebecca** and I'm calling about the one-bedroom apartment you have advertised at _____. You can leave a message for me at my workplace at anytime. The number is _____. Please call and let me know if the apartment is still available. Thanks."

Survey 2

To explore whether or not landlords would admit discrimination to a researcher, additional landlords were surveyed. These landlords knew that they were speaking to a researcher and were directly asked whether or not they would rent a unit to a hypothetical battered woman. Their answers were compared to the availability of rental units in the shelter design of the basic scenario. In addition, open-ended questions about renting to a battered woman were asked.

Participants

A total of 273 landlords were called in Survey 1. Another 54 landlords were asked to take part in Survey 2; 31 agreed. Overall, 47 per cent of the landlords were women, and the average asking rent was $832.10.

Procedure

The landlords were randomly selected from *Toronto Star* newspaper advertisements offering one-bedroom apartments and they were never called more than once.

When each call was made, the dialogue from one of the nine scenario/conditions or combinations in Survey 1 or Survey 2 was randomly used.

In the basic and child scenarios, the researcher asked if the apartment was available and then disclosed to the landlord that she was a researcher.

In the answering machine scenario, landlords were asked to call back. The researcher noted whether the landlords called back and the availability of the rental unit.

In Survey 2, the researcher introduced herself and asked the landlord to participate by answering a few questions.

FINDINGS

Basic scenario

- In the shelter condition, landlords were significantly less likely to say that a rental unit was available compared to the control condition.
- There was no significant difference between the shelter condition and the friends condition.

Child scenario

- In the shelter condition, landlords were significantly less likely to say that a rental unit was available compared to both the friends and control conditions.
- When the basic and the child scenarios were combined across conditions and compared to each other, there was no significant difference.

Answering machine scenario

- In the shelter condition, landlords were significantly less likely to say that a rental unit was available compared to the control condition.
- There was no significant difference between the shelter condition and the friends condition.

Combined across the three scenarios

- In the three shelter conditions, landlords were significantly less likely to say that a rental unit was available compared to the three control conditions.
- In the three shelter conditions, landlords were significantly less likely to indicate that a rental unit was available compared to the three friends conditions.

Survey 2

- There was no significant difference between the availability of the rental unit in the shelter condition of the basic scenario compared to landlords' answers to the survey question about whether or not they would be willing to rent a unit to a battered woman.
- Open-ended responses suggested, not surprisingly, that ability to pay the rent would be the most important factor in whether a landlord would rent to a battered woman. Some believed that the rent money would be in jeopardy because of her precarious situation. Other perceived risks included general notations about "problems" and "dangers" that might result. The open-ended results also showed that a small minority of landlords blamed battered women or were openly hostile toward them and would clearly not rent a unit to them regardless of their ability to pay.

In all three scenarios, availability was significantly different between the shelter condition and control condition. This indicates that housing discrimination against battered women exists.

Because there were mixed results when the shelter condition was compared to the friends condition, whether housing discrimination is more likely against women staying at a shelter or more generally against women without stable living conditions is less clear.

There was a significant difference in the child scenario, but not in the basic and answering machine scenarios. This lack of significance was likely due to sample size, because collapsing across the three scenarios strongly supports the hypothesis that a landlord is more likely to say there is a rental unit available if the caller says she is staying with friends than if she says she is staying in a shelter for battered women.

This provides some evidence that victims of domestic violence are prone to housing discrimination as a direct result of their status as victims rather than because of the assumptions, such as being unemployed, poor or undesirable, that go along with having unstable living conditions.

The child scenario was included to help determine whether assumptions about battered women with children might influence the results. The significant difference found in the basic scenario persisted and was actually strengthened in the child scenario, so assumptions about battered women with children should not have affected the results of the study. Similarly, the significant findings persisted in the answering machine scenario, which specified that the caller had a job, which served as a control for employment.

This study also examined willingness to admit discrimination and the results suggest that landlords are willing to admit discrimination to a researcher.

There was no significant difference between the number of landlords who said they would rent to a battered woman and those saying that the rental unit was available in the shelter condition of the basic scenario.

In addition, a substantial number of landlords were surprisingly candid in their unwillingness to rent to a battered woman and some were even openly hostile towards battered women.

A secondary purpose of this study was to determine whether the answering machine scenario could be used successfully in discrimination research. The results suggest that this is a feasible method, but it is not equivalent to a live-caller design. The availability base rate was substantially lower because a number of landlords did not call back or did not indicate in their message whether the apartment was still available. This method may be particularly well-suited when vacancy rates are high and might not work when vacancy rates are low.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that housing discrimination against battered women exists, although the reasons for the discrimination are less clear.

It was impossible to control for every possible assumption about battered women. The researchers chose to control for having a child and for being employed, neither of which completely accounted for the discrimination found in the results.

Ironically, because a number of landlords were willing to admit that they were unlikely to rent to a battered woman, they might also be willing to openly discuss the problem and help generate solutions. It will be important to make positive connections between advocates for battered women and landlords in efforts to change landlords' assumptions and stereotypes about victims of domestic violence. These links are particularly important and needed with landlords who rent units in desirable, high-security buildings.

Future studies should explore which rental units are particularly prohibitive toward battered women and determine the extent to which housing discrimination is responsible. Battered women face many challenges when leaving an abusive partner. The need for secure housing cannot be overemphasized because women are at the greatest risk for serious injury when they leave an abusive partner.[1] They should not be additionally burdened with discrimination that keeps them from renting the best housing that they can afford.

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[1] Hotton, T. (2001) "Spousal Violence after Marital Separation" *Juristat* 21(7), Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada.

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